

A building that was built in 1947 as Wagon Wheel Park skating rink and dance hall, and once housed Riverside Bowl, has become an eyesore. It is scheduled to be destroyed as part of a Camas Fire Department practice burn on Saturday, March 24.



HEATHER ACHESON/POST-RECORD

Wagon Wheel Park

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building," said Dalphyne Carroll, Willard's wife.

Just as Mason, who had previously operated a skating rink at the nearby American Legion Hall in Camas and Holcomb's skating rink in Vancouver, was preparing to open the new venue to the public in 1948, a major flood hit the area. The infamous "Memorial Day flood" destroyed the city of Vanport and traumatized other cities along the Columbia River.

According to the June 3, 1948, edition of the Post-Record, the Red Cross reported that more than 160 families, comprised of nearly 500 people, had evacuated the Camas-Washougal area due to flooding — a record number.

One Post-Record reporter was able to hop on a plane from what was then called "Groves airport" (now Grove Field in Fern Prairie) and get a bird's-eye view of the damage.

"Coming back to Camas, one could see the Oak Park school [now the Camas Community Center] still standing on its island of green and Midland Acres with the backed up Washougal River spread

over roadway and around houses. At Washougal, the [Pendleton] woolen mill buildings stood knee-deep in water as had a part of the Crown Willamette mill and the newly improved athletic field.

"Only by seeing it from the air, spread out like that below, can anyone possibly begin to have a faint idea of the incalculable cost of a disaster as has been visited on this part of the country or the enormous clean-up job ahead."

Willard said in response to the impending threat to his newly completed building, Mason led the construction of an 8 foot high dirt dike around his property topped with about 2 additional feet of sand bags, which kept water damage to a minimum. Dozens of volunteers from the community and the U.S. military helped build the blockade.

The dirt from the dike was later spread throughout the property, raising the ground height substantially.

"There are still about four steps that lead up to the entrance buried in the dike material," he said.

Willard, 84, and Dalphyne, 81, met at the Wagon Wheel and married on

Nov. 8, 1952. They raised their family and lived in Washougal until moving to Vancouver in 1991. The couple has many fond memories of time spent at the Camas landmark.

"When they first started holding the dances, there was nothing to do," Dalphyne said. "The [dance hall and skating rink] were our highlights. It was a fun place. Those were our stomping grounds."

It was when popular music styles began to shift in the late 1950s that country music lost its wide-spread popularity and attendance at the dance hall began to diminish.

"The business couldn't survive just with the skating rink alone," Willard said.

Wagon Wheel Park closed around 1957, and Mason and his wife Alta moved to Seaside, Ore., where he opened another skating rink. He lived in Seaside until his death in 2001.

In the late 1950s the Wagon Wheel Park building was purchased by a new owner, siding was placed on top of the fir logs that were beginning to rot, and it was re-opened as a bowling alley — a use that continued for the next

several decades. Riverside Bowl closed five years ago, and the building has been vacant ever since.

Memories remain tucked away inside

There are still some remnants of the building's 1950s heyday left inside.

Today, the original river rock fireplace still stands. Phares said she hopes to be able to go inside the building before it is torched to remove several agate rocks that were placed in its keystone by her father's grandmother, the late Blanche Mason.

Phares also believes some of the original light fixtures made from actual wagon wheels may still be hidden above a false ceiling that was installed when the building became a bowling alley.

"It's sort of sad," Dalphyne said of the impending destruction of the place that was once the heart of Camas social life. "We had a lot of good times there."

"It was a pretty interesting place in its time," Willard added. "But nothing's forever."